

The Beards

The kidnaping and killing of an exiled Moroccan opposition leader in Paris last October has shaken confidence in the de Gaulle regime by seeming to involve among others the chief of the SDECE, the French counterespionage service.

Mendi Ben Barka was a 46-year-old Socialist whose opposition to conservative King Hassan II earned him exile and a death sentence in absentia. He was one of the organizers of the recent "Three Continents" conference in Havana.

He came to Paris from Geneva October 29 last year to make arrangements for a film damning colonialism, and was on his way to the Brasserie Lipp for the appointment when two French policemen picked him up and drove him to the suburban villa where it is believed he was murdered. October 30, General Mohamed Oufkir, the Moroccan Interior Minister, passed through Paris and visited the villa; Georges Figon, an ex-convict charged with taking part in the abduction but never arrested, was "found shot dead" by the police, after he wrote in the magazine *Express* that he saw Oufkir kill Ben Barka with a knife. Oufkir, "on my word as a former French officer," denies it. France asked that Oufkir be arrested and sent back to Paris, the Morocco government refused and the two countries broke off ambassadorial relations.

Antoine Lopez, an Air France employee who is also a police informer, a friend of Oufkir and, as it turns out, an agent of the SDECE, has testified that he knew of the abduction plot as early as last May, and told Major Marcel Leroy, his boss in the counterespionage service. Leroy says he knew of it but just ordered Lopez not to get involved. The disobedient Lopez, however, enlisted two Paris cops to kidnap Ben Barka. Leroy claims he didn't know his service had been compromised. "Lopez never told me he had taken part in the kidnaping. I believed he was just passing on information like any good agent."

Though they readily admitted picking up Ben Barka, the two policemen were not arrested until November 11. Georges Figon started writing letters to newspapers telling what he knew. On January 17, three noisy police vans converged on Figon's apartment building. When police opened his door there, they said they found Figon dead with a bullet hole behind his right ear. The satirical newspaper *Canard Enchaîné* reflected public skepticism with a banner headline saying, "Figon kills himself with a bullet fired at him from point-blank range." *France-Soir* wanted to know why government police were involved. The respected independent *Le Monde* urged the regime to *debarbouze* itself, get rid of the vast network of secret police, spies, informers and *barbouzes* ("bearded ones") — the special cops who

seem to have the same license as James Bond. As recently as 1963 the *barbouzes* kidnaped Colonel Antoine Argoud, a foe of de Gaulle, from a Munich hotel and delivered him, trussed, gagged and beaten, to a parking lot in front of the Paris police prefecture. France, ignoring protests from Germany, went ahead and tried Argoud, convicting him of treason.